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THE CONCEPT OF PREHISTORY AND THE INVENTION OF THE TERMS  
'PREHISTORIC' AND 'PREHISTORIAN':  
THE SCANDINAVIAN ORIGIN, 1833-1850.

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ABSTRACT

It is usually assumed by historians of archaeology that the 'concept of prehistory' and the terms 'prehistoric' and 'prehistorian' first appeared in Britain and/or France in the mid nineteenth century. This contribution demonstrates that the Scandinavian equivalent terms *forhistorisk* and *förhistorisk* were in use substantially earlier, appearing in print first in 1834. Initial usage by Molbech differed slightly from that of the present day, but within three years the modern usage had been developed. The concept of prehistory was first developed at the same time by C.J. Thomsen, though he did not use the word. It was used more frequently in the nationalism debates of the 1840s, particularly by J.J.A. Worsaae. One of the other protagonists, the Norwegian Peter Andreas Munch, was probably responsible for introducing the concept to Daniel Wilson in 1849, and suggesting that an English equivalent to *forhistorisk* was required.

KEY WORDS	prehistoric	forhistorisk	Molbech	Thomsen
	Nilsson	Worsaae	Munch	Daniel Wilson

INTRODUCTION

Modern archaeologists clearly grasp the concepts of 'history' and 'prehistory'. We have no difficulty envisaging a historical period extending a certain distance back, and before this a much longer prehistoric period extending into the deep past. For the historical period there is documentary evidence; but we accept that there was a *prehistoric* period, studied by *prehistorians*, for which there is (by definition) no documentation – material evidence is the only means by which we can examine it. But until the 19th century there was no concept of prehistory. The origin of the concept is one of the key developments in our understanding of the human past, and has seen considerable discussion in the recent English and French literature. This discussion has explored the 19th century archaeologies of the two countries, examining both the *concept* of prehistory, and the *terminology* used to discuss it.

Terminology is the more clear-cut. The first use of the word 'prehistoric' in English was not by an Englishman at all, but by the Scot Daniel Wilson, in his *Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* (Wilson 1851). It is generally thought likely that he invented the term himself (Daniel 1964, Chippindale 1988, Kehoe 1991, 1998,

Trigger 1999, Kelley 2003). Clermont and Smith (1990:98-99) however point out that the French archaeologist Gustav d'Eichthal however used *préhistorique* as early as 1845, but add that it remains unclear whether Wilson ever came across this and (consciously or unconsciously) adopted it. *Préhistorien* first appeared in French in 1872, almost 20 years before 'prehistorian' first occurs in English (Clermont and Smith 1990:97).

The concept of prehistory is less clear-cut. In English, Daniel Wilson was probably the first to demonstrate a clear grasp of it; certainly no English or Irish archaeologist did so before him (Rowley-Conwy in press). In France, Paul Tournal used *anté-historique* as early as 1833 (Coye 1993, Stoczowski 1993), but it is open to question whether he understood this in the way 'prehistoric' is now used. Tournal excavated caves and recovered human artefacts and bones of extinct mammals in the same layers, believing them to be contemporary. This extended human antiquity further back into the most recent geological past, which he therefore divided into two: the historic, and the *anté-historique* (Grayson 1983:101-102, Coye 1993, 1997:67-70). Stoczowski (1993:17) argues that this reveals a clear idea of prehistory on Tournal's part; but Groenen (1994:45) argues that since Tournal never analyzed the implications of his discovery, he cannot be considered the originator of the concept. Chippindale (1988:307) mentions an English use of 'ante-historic' by H.N. Coleridge in 1834, but in a discussion of classical Greek poetry. Its first English use in an archaeological context may have been in 1849 by the Irishman Sir William Wilde, father of the playwright Oscar Wilde, in his description of the antiquities of the Boyne Valley (Wilde 1849:6); Sir William did not however have a clear concept of prehistory (Rowley-Conwy in press).

The purpose of this contribution is to argue that the Anglo-French focus of the recent discussion has been misplaced. The Danish word for 'prehistoric' was first published in 1834, over a decade before even d'Eichthal's monograph. This has passed almost entirely unnoticed in the recent Anglo-French literature; the only exceptions appear to be Chippindale, who identifies a Danish mention in 1837, but he states that the term did not enter the technical language until 30 years later, after its general adoption in English and French (Chippindale 1988:310); and Welinder, who in a short commentary on Chippindale's article mentions a few Swedish uses in subsequent years (Welinder 1991). This contribution will however show that the Danish and Swedish words were used well over 100 times up to 1850 (table 1). It will also show that the concept was well developed by 1836 – though not pioneered by the man who invented the word – and that it became a central aspect of the nationalist debate of the later 1840s. Finally, it will show that Daniel Wilson probably picked up the word and the concept from this Scandinavian tradition – not from a French antecedent. In exploring these strands of the history of archaeology, the paper will focus relatively narrowly on the intellectual origins and development of the concept of prehistory and 'prehistoric' in Scandinavia and Scotland; it will not examine the broader political or contextual aspects except insofar as these are necessary for the pursuance of this primary aim. Nor will it stray from the geographical limits laid down – the elucidation of the situation in other countries and other intellectual traditions is left to those more conversant with them than is the present author.

THE 1830s: THOMSEN AND MOLBECH

The Danish and Norwegian word cognate to ‘prehistoric’ is *forhistorisk*; in Swedish it is *förhistorisk*. The Danish historian and philologist Christian Molbech (1783-1857) (fig. 1) delivered a series of lectures in 1833, of which he published two extracts as separate articles (1834, 1836a). *Forhistorisk* appears in both articles, so it appears likely that Molbech first used the word in his 1833 lectures. However, like his contemporary Tournal but for very different reasons, Molbech did not have a fully modern concept of prehistory.

It is easy to assume that the early 19th century view of history was the same as our own, and that the absence of a concept of prehistory extending before this was simply a failure of the imagination; but in Denmark, nothing could be further from the truth. Over the previous century a deep and complex historical structure had been erected, culminating in the work of Peter Frederik Suhm (1728-1798). What Suhm sought to do was to extract the kernel of historical truth he believed was present in early myths and legends, and turn it into usable history. While recognizing the imperfections and problems, Suhm believed he could deconstruct the legendary Odin into three separate historical personages. Odin III, a refugee from Roman expansion, had led his followers into Scandinavia in c. 70 BC; the first Odin was the leader of the original immigrants, whose arrival Suhm estimated occurred some time around 1400 BC, based on an annual rate of migration from the Tower of Babel calculated from the biblical chronology (Suhm 1770). Suhm regarded the time from Odin I to Odin III as the ‘dark age’; the time from Odin III to c. AD 800 as the ‘fabulous age’; and subsequent times as the ‘historical age’ (Suhm 1802:tables I & II). His use of ‘historical’ to label the third age of course did not imply that the first two were prehistoric in the modern sense, because all three periods were known only through history and comparative philology. Suhm was able to reconstruct the complete sequence of kings from Odin III onwards, so the fabulous age was reasonably well documented; even for the little-known dark age, ‘\*most of what we know about it rests on *more or less historically* reasonable presumptions’ (Suhm 1802:1, original emphasis)<sup>1</sup>.

Suhm’s scheme was accepted until the 1830s; Molbech was its leading critic. Molbech did not regard Suhm’s scheme as completely invalid, simply as less reliable than Suhm had envisaged. He considered that only from AD 872 did the sources become solid enough to allow reliable history to be written (Molbech 1836a:421-2), and he contested the existence of Odin III (Molbech 1837:99-100). This is the context in which he used the word *forhistorisk*; he did not highlight the word in any way or even define it, so he must have assumed that it would be instantly understood by his readers. This is its first appearance.<sup>2</sup>

\*It is known that among the Germanic peoples, who comprise the population of Northwest Europe, and who since prehistoric times were divided into two main tribes, that in one of these (the German) the *Anglo-Saxons*, and in the other (the Scandinavian) the *Icelanders* and the *Norwegians*, were those who had the earliest national literature; both these groups also had the earliest written history in the *language of the country* (Molbech 1834:421, original emphases).



This appears straightforward to the modern reader – but Molbech’s original readership would have had a different understanding in the context of Suhm’s chronology and terminology. In the early 1830s the only usable sources of information about the earliest times were historical and philological, however problematic. The ‘prehistoric’ split between Germans and Scandinavians was thus *known from history and philology*; it was part of Suhm’s scenario for the original occupation of northwestern Europe, the split into two groups occurring when the original immigrants reached the southeastern shore of the Baltic. Molbech was using *forhistorisk* simply to label the time before Suhm’s historical era, which started in about AD 800. But there was considerable historical documentation available for this ‘prehistoric’ period; it was just not very reliable.

A consideration of Molbech’s other mentions of *forhistorisk* in the 1830s confirms that this is what he meant. He stated that sagas ‘\*still have too much of the poetic nature of the prehistoric age’ about them for the history they contain to be easily separable from the myths; and he praised the medieval historian Saxo Grammaticus for recording the ‘\*legends and stories that reached him from the prehistoric period’ (Molbech 1834:437, 453). Two years later he referred to ‘\*the heroic or prehistoric period’ (Molbech 1836a:443). Although he disputed the historical existence of Odin III, he nevertheless assumed that some sources carried echoes of his purported times:

\*Among the ancient legends of Scandinavia, in its oldest poetry and writings, and in its religion, we encounter a famous name known for millennia, which has also acquired great historical regard and value, even though it lies beyond definite knowledge, or far back in the prehistoric period. This name is that of Odin... (Molbech 1837:80).

Molbech’s conception was thus more ‘protohistoric’ than prehistoric in its modern sense. This impression will be reinforced in the next sections when we consider his subsequent writings. The 1830s did however see the development of something approaching the modern concept of prehistory – put forward not by Molbech, but by C.J. Thomsen, the acclaimed originator of the ‘three age system’ of Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Thomsen was not a man who rushed precipitately into print; he had worked out his archaeological sequence getting on for two decades before his chapter appeared in the epoch-making volume *Ledetraad for Nordisk Oldkyndighed* (Thomsen 1836)<sup>3</sup>. In the 1820s, however, Thomsen rested it on Suhm’s historical outline. This emerges from a letter Thomsen wrote to J.G.G. Büsching on 19 February 1825 (printed in Hermansen 1934:101-105, translated in Rowley-Conwy in press). He adopted as a chronological marker the fact that ‘\*Odin and his hoard came to Scandinavia around the time of the birth of Christ’ (Hermansen 1934:102); Odin was said to be the bringer of metalworking to Scandinavia, but since metallurgy would take some time to become established, Thomsen placed the start of his Bronze Age around AD 200. Iron appeared perhaps in the seventh or eighth centuries AD (Hermansen 1934:102). He reiterated these dates to the Swedish antiquarian Bror Emil Hildebrand of Lund, who visited him in 1830 (H. Hildebrand 1880:146-147).

By 1836, this had changed. Thomsen in his *Ledetraad* chapter avoided mention of Odin, presumably due to Molbech’s criticisms, but he did consider that an immigration had occurred at about the relevant time. The crucial change was that

Thomsen now considered that it was iron, not bronze, that had been introduced at that time (Thomsen 1836:60). This pushed the Stone and Bronze Ages further back in time – just when Suhm’s historical scenario was being weakened by Molbech’s assault. Thomsen realized both that his artefacts reached further back than the historical record, and that they provided a different *kind* of information:

\*Since these [*antiquities*] can never provide us with new [*historical*] facts, they can neither confirm ancient royal successions nor fix points in time; but they can, collectively and comparatively, give us a clearer idea of our ancestors' religion, culture, way of life and so on, than the written sources; the latter can never be ascribed so great an antiquity, the ancient stories are mixed with more recent additions, and because they were first written down at a later date must often be suspected of having been considerably distorted. Archaeological remains, which cannot be described as true written sources, thus supplement them in broadening the limits of our knowledge of a time for which the texts are just beginning to earn our trust, and to suggest or disprove ideas about the movements of peoples or connections concerning which written history is completely silent (Thomsen 1836:27-28).

This combination of archaeology replacing the now-discredited historical scheme as the means of studying the most ancient past, and the focus of this archaeology on a different sort of knowledge, marks the clear expression of Thomsen’s concept of prehistory. Thomsen however did not use the word *forhistorisk*, but the more general *oldtid*. This word does not (contra Daniel 1964:9) mean ‘prehistory’, but is less specific, signifying something more like ‘ancient times’. Over the last century it has extended its meaning as prehistory has deepened, but in the nineteenth century it covered the Viking and earlier medieval periods as well as the preceding epochs. Swedish does not use *oldtid* but has the corresponding *forntid*.

Was the word *forhistorisk* in use before 1834? It is impossible to prove categorically that it was not, but two things support Molbech’s 1834 usage as the original. The first is that Molbech, who was a philologist as well as a historian, produced a two-volume Danish dictionary in 1833 – and *forhistorisk* does not appear in it (Molbech 1833). This suggests that Molbech coined the word for the lectures he gave the year the dictionary was published. Second, Scandinavian histories produced in the years before 1834 do not use *forhistorisk* either. The 1820s was a poor decade for Danish history writing (Jørgensen 1943); Vedel Simonsen’s book of the preceding decade contains the first mentions of the Danish terms for the Stone, Copper and Iron Ages in a footnote (Vedel Simonsen 1813, I(2):76n1), but not *forhistorisk*. There was a lot more historical and archaeological writing going on in Sweden in the 1820s, but the authors consulted did not apparently use *förhistorisk*. This is true of the papers in the ten volumes of the antiquarian periodical *Iduna*, published between 1811 and 1824. Magnus Bruzelius did in one paper make the second mention of the Stone Age (M. Bruzelius 1822: 305), stating a few pages later that this was ‘\*a time for which history does not provide us with the slightest illumination’ (M. Bruzelius 1822: 311). On this basis B. Hildebrand (1937: 321) states that Bruzelius had a clear concept of prehistory, even though he did not coin a term for it. However, Bruzelius’ chronology was so short that this is most doubtful; he regarded bronze artefacts as dating to no earlier than AD 800 (M. Bruzelius 1817: 197). In a major book published in 1830, Bruzelius explicitly espoused the Odinian historical model and chronology (M.

Bruzelius 1830:15-16), as did two other Swedish historians writing at the same time (Fryxell 1826:7-8; Geijer 1832:31-36). Three specifically archaeological books in Swedish that appeared between 1815 and 1830 (Liljegren and Brunius 1823; Sjöborg 1815, 1822-30), as well as one in Norwegian (Klüwer 1823), made no mention of *förhistorisk*. While this is not an exhaustive review of the literature of the period, it does appear likely that nobody clearly articulated the concept before Thomsen, or used the word before Molbech.

## SCIENTIFIC PREHISTORY: ESCHRICHT AND NILSSON, 1837-1847

The first uses of *förhistorisk* to refer to the modern concept of prehistory were arguably by two natural scientists, Daniel Eschricht and Sven Nilsson. As scientists they had no loyalty to the early legendary accounts, and mentioned them only to emphasize that they were dispensing with them. Eschricht's paper appeared first. He was a physiologist, and the first to suggest on the basis of human crania that there had been a racial succession in ancient Europe. He was conversant with Thomsen's newly-published chronology, and examined skulls he believed to be of Stone Age and Bronze Age date. This far back, history provided 'almost no guidance' (Eschricht 1837:109), so the skulls were the only evidence of racial succession; round-headed Stone Age people were succeeded by long-headed Bronze Age folk. This remarkable demonstration that the crania could yield such information led to Eschricht's use of *förhistorisk*; calling for more data, he stated that '\*...if everyone would do their bit, knowledge of the country's circumstances in that prehistoric time may yet reach a much higher level of certainty than would seem possible at first glance' (Eschricht 1837:109).

Nilsson was a zoologist who wrote extensively on archaeological subjects. He produced a short preliminary essay in 1835, as part of the introduction to a book on birds, arguing that the users of stone tools were hunter-gatherers, not agriculturalists (Nilsson 1835). This was unexpectedly influential, and rapidly appeared in annotated translations in both Danish (Molbech 1836b) and Norwegian (Christie 1836). Nilsson did not use *förhistorisk* in this, but he did espouse a long chronology, suggesting that stone tools might have been in use as much as 3000 years ago (Nilsson 1835:L). This Molbech could not accept, stating that this date was '\*...so circumstantial and unknown... that it is more appropriate for the imagination than for thought; it places us in the mythical rather than the historical world' (Molbech 1836b:392), which once again reveals his conceptual limits.

Nilsson's book (Nilsson 1838-43) appeared as separate fascicles over several years starting in 1838, enlarged and united in 1843 (Rowley-Conwy 2004). This major work produced a chronology of economic stages which Nilsson grafted onto Thomsen's artefactual scheme (Rowley-Conwy in press). It also presented the first Swedish use of *förhistorisk*; in his 1838 foreword Nilsson stated that his subject was the original inhabitants of Scandinavia:

\*By the *original inhabitants* of Scandinavia I mean not just the first people who immigrated or were originally present in the country, but all those who lived here throughout the time that went before history; I thus mean the

*prehistoric people of Scandinavia*, of one or several tribes (Nilsson 1838-43:i-ii, original emphases).

In the 1843 extension to his foreword, he contrasted the two current ways of viewing the prehistoric past:

\*Two downright contradictory views of everything concerning the Scandinavian prehistoric period, each irreconcilable with the other, have been in competition. One takes literally almost everything found in [*the early written sources*]; the other considers everything prehistoric as mythical, allegoric, or poetic; the events described... were totally imaginary.... – This latter view has become more and more prevalent and is becoming generally accepted (Nilsson 1838-43:vii).

Nilsson added that his own approach did not necessarily reject conclusions derived from the early sources, but merely sought to test them using the material evidence (Nilsson 1838-43:vii).

Not surprisingly, the possibility that all the early sources were to be tested, and possibly rejected, annoyed Molbech. He was the editor of a historical journal, and was consequently able to give himself space for a lengthy review article dealing with Nilsson's book. He sought to retain a considerable role for the early sources, and clearly felt that Nilsson had gone too far:

\*The tone in which he expresses himself about his predecessors in the presentation of 'Scandinavia's prehistoric time' is what one would normally call superior; and his characterisation of the two 'directly opposite and mutually exclusive views' which in this matter 'have been in competition', is in no way correct. The earlier, uncritical and unhistorical approach thus e.g. never went so far that it... regarded the contents of [*early sources*] as 'literal'. Nor does the current approach regard all prehistoric material as 'myth, allegory or poetry'; since the author here forgets traditional history, which may be the *truth written as poetry*, or a poetic growth germinating from a historical root, without having to be entirely or solely poetry (Molbech 1843:618, original emphasis).

Nilsson replied to Molbech in a literary journal. He rejected Molbech's call for a historical methodology. Among all the historians of the ancient world, only Tacitus even mentioned a people in Europe who used stone and bone tools. History could thus not deal with the original inhabitants of Scandinavia; but Nilsson knew a discipline that could:

\*[*The original inhabitants are*] a subject which lies outside all of history, and the history of which, as such, is neither *known* nor *can be* known. But if this view is correct, and no unprejudiced or non-partisan person could doubt it, then mankind's prehistoric period must be the subject of a science other than history; and since mankind in its prehistoric period is always *close to*, if not actually *in*, some kind of a state of nature, the *natural sciences* must thus be the ones most suited, if not indeed the only ones suited, to delineating and describing the developmental situation of mankind and the differences

between the various tribes in terms of type, way of life, and level of development etc. in the time periods under discussion (Nilsson 1844: 146, original emphases).

This interesting exchange clearly reveals the opposed viewpoints and methodologies of the two men, including Nilsson's concept of prehistory. It also reveals the way both routinely used *forhistorisk*, albeit in somewhat different ways. Nilsson made the same arguments in several other papers in the 1840s (Nilsson 1843, 1846, 1847). One of these, a paper read to a scientific meeting in Christiania (as Oslo was then known) on 18 July 1844 but not published until three years later, has the distinction of being apparently the first ever published to contain 'prehistoric' in its title: *Bidrag til kunskapen om människans tillvaro och verksamhet i Skandinavien, under den förhistoriska tiden* ['\*Contribution to the knowledge of the presence and activities of humans in Scandinavia, in the prehistoric period'] (Nilsson 1847).

Welinder (1991) has mentioned Nilsson in this context in an article in English, but despite this most of these developments remain little known in the anglophone literature. The works of Molbech and Eschricht have never been published in English. A considerably modified third edition of Nilsson's book was translated many years later, under the auspices of Sir John Lubbock (Nilsson 1868). Curiously, Lubbock cut Nilsson's entire 1838-43 foreword, and this was where all his mentions of 'förhistorisk' were to be found. Nilsson's 1868 preface did mention in passing that his first edition had dealt with '*the prehistoric inhabitants of Scandinavia*' (Nilsson 1868:xlvi, original emphasis), but a translated footnote from 30 years later is scarcely a reliable guide to the original Swedish terminology! Nilsson's important role has thus never been properly understood.

## WORSAAE AND THE NATIONALIST DEBATE, 1846-1850

In the mid and later 1840s *forhistorisk* was used in at least three ways. Molbech (1844) continued to champion his 'protohistoric' version. Heiberg (1843) took a biblical perspective, arguing that history started with the origin of human free will after the expulsion from Eden; since the Fall could not be studied empirically, it was consequently '\*one of the prehistoric preconditions, without which no history could take place' (Heiberg 1843:242). But most importantly, the youthful J.J.A. Worsaae (1821-1885) (fig. 2) adopted the word and repeatedly and routinely used it in its modern sense. This has entirely escaped the notice of Anglo-French commentators, because Worsaae in the 1840s used the term only in publications that were not translated into English; thus 'prehistoric' does not appear in his influential 1849 English book (Worsaae 1849c).

Worsaae however used *forhistorisk* from 1846, and (like Nilsson) in a way that fully accords with the modern concept. His chronology for most of the 1840s was however rather short. As discussed above, Thomsen (1836) considered that iron appeared in Denmark around the time of Christ. But Worsaae felt that if this were true, more iron objects should have been discovered in pagan burial mounds; their rarity led him to conclude that iron was not introduced much before AD 800 (Worsaae 1841:158-161). Not until the end of the 1840s did finds of Roman imports with iron artefacts convince him to move the start of the Iron Age as far back as Thomsen's suggestion

(Worsaae 1849d). Throughout the 1840s Worsaae was mounting a strenuous assault on the ability of history to deal with the period before AD 800, and asserting archaeology's claim to this period (Rowley-Conwy in press). The Bronze Age even in Worsaae's short chronology was prehistoric, as it fell before AD 800; but for deep prehistory beyond the reach of all hints in classical sources, he had to rely on the Stone Age in the first millennium BC and before. This is why he stressed the Stone Age so much in the debates of the later 1840s.

Worsaae's position at the start of the nationalist debate is summed up in his book on the antiquities of the southern Swedish province of Blekinge, and their context in Europe as a whole (Worsaae 1846a). Worsaae argued that archaeological conclusions were still too often fitted into historical schemes, but for the more ancient past this was simply not possible because the historical sources were inadequate or absent (Worsaae 1846a:2-3). Historians used to consider all antiquities to be quite late; dolmens were interpreted as the altars, and stone tools as the sacrificial implements, of people who otherwise used metals; for these earlier historians, '\*there was no question, nor could there be so early on, that they might be remains of an earlier or indeed a prehistoric people' (Worsaae 1846a:45). Worsaae developed his argument with regard to the prehistoric populations of southern Scandinavia. Nilsson (1838-43:ch. 2) considered that the craniological evidence indicated that Stone Age Scandinavians were of Finnish stock. Molbech (1844) argued that Stone and Bronze Age peoples were Celts, because the stone-chambered dolmens and passage graves were found in other areas of Europe that had been occupied by Celtic peoples. Worsaae considered these conclusions unfounded. Opposing Nilsson, he pointed out that there were no dolmens in the areas now occupied by Finns, and in any case a nomadic people would never have constructed anything so permanent as a dolmen; furthermore, Eschricht's (1837) craniological study had suggested that Stone Age peoples were Indo-Europeans not Finns (Worsaae 1846a:48-51). Against Molbech, Worsaae argued that Celts were always described as agriculturalists (and following Nilsson, he regarded Stone Age peoples as hunter-gatherers). There was too abrupt a transition from Stone to Bronze for this to be an internal development; the Bronze Age must have represented an immigration of new people. Thus while the Bronze Age in parts of Europe might have involved Celts, the Stone Age could not: '\*...there are no more grounds for regarding the stone graves as the monuments of a *Celtic*, than of a *Finnish* people... they were built by a *so-far unknown people*.... Not even their name or closest relationships do we know' (Worsaae 1846a:53, original emphases).

It is therefore more than sufficient to call this '*the prehistoric tribe*' – a name which one can probably correctly ascribe to them, because at that level of development they are not mentioned in any historical source... [*therefore*] one can place the period of florescence of this prehistoric people in western and northern Europe *three to four thousand years* back (Worsaae 1846a:54, original emphases).

Molbech (1847) reviewed Worsaae's book in generally warm terms, but took issue with a number of points including the claim that forest clearance in the interior would have been minimal without iron tools. Molbech's reason was that (given Worsaae's late date for the Iron Age) this conflicted with '\*prehistoric legends' (Molbech 1847:686).

The nationalist assault on Denmark came from north and south, Norway and Germany. Norway and Denmark had been united under the Danish Crown since the medieval period, but Norway had been awarded to Sweden by the victorious Allies at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Norwegian nationalism was growing in the 1840s, and the historian and philologist Peter Andreas Munch (1810-1863) was one of its leading proponents. Suhm (1770) had proposed that the initial migrants from the southeast had reached the shores of the Baltic near the estuary of the Dvina, and then divided (see above). One group, ancestral to the Germans, moved west along the southern shore of the Baltic; the other, ancestral to the Scandinavians, crossed the Baltic into what is now eastern Sweden, and spread west and south from there. Munch proposed a variation on this, arguing that the southern or Germanic stream *had in fact occupied Denmark as well*; most occupants of Denmark had been German-speaking until the mid-first millennium AD, when they emigrated to England – these were the historically-recorded invasions of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. This left Denmark largely unpopulated; it was then filled by a migration of Norwegians (Munch 1846a and b, 1847). The colonists of Iceland had also come from Norway. This meant that Norwegian was the ‘original’ Scandinavia language, and Munch could claim that all the early literature was not so much Scandinavian, as purely Norwegian (Munch and Unger 1847:1-3). The linguistic term *oldnordisk* (‘Old Nordic’ or ‘Old Scandinavian’) should be done away with; the correct term was *oldnorsk* (‘Old Norwegian’) or simply *norsk* (plain ‘Norwegian’), because contemporary Danish had become modernized compared to Norwegian, which retained more of its original characteristics (Munch 1849b:46-47).

Worsaae was seriously unimpressed. He quoted place-name and rune-stone evidence to show that there was no trace of an earlier German population in Denmark (Worsaae 1848:9-10). He argued that all Scandinavians, not just the ancestral Norwegians, had crossed the eastern Baltic and spread out from there; it was inconceivable that the cliffs and wildernesses of Norway should have been occupied before the more accessible regions of southern Sweden and Denmark (1849a:10). The idea that nineteenth-century Norwegian was an ‘older’ language than nineteenth-century Danish he disposed of using a joke he had been told in Ireland (which he had visited in 1846-47):

\*With regard to their linguistic evidence, based on the older nature of the contemporary language in Norway than in Sweden or Denmark, one is almost unable to avoid thinking of the Irishman, who upon seeing one of the much discussed Irish round towers, which had the peculiarity that the lower part was built with beauty and precision, while the upper part was highly irregular, said with true Irish wit that the upper part, which clearly displayed a more primitive level of skill, therefore had to be the older part of the tower, and was built first (Worsaae 1849a:10-11).

But Worsaae could not joke his way past German nationalism, because war broke out in 1848 and Prussia invaded Denmark in 1848-49.

This development came about due to the complexities of the infamous ‘Schleswig-Holstein question’, which the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli is reputed to have said that only three men had ever understood: Prince Albert, who was dead; a German professor, who had gone mad; and Disraeli himself, who had forgotten all

about it. In the 1840s Danish rule extended further south than it does today, down to Hamburg. Schleswig and Holstein (spelt 'Slesvig' and 'Holsten' in Danish) were the duchies that formed the base of the Jutland peninsula (fig. 3). In a complex arrangement, the King of Denmark was also King of Schleswig, but only Duke of Holstein. Holstein was part of the post-1815 *Bund*, or German Confederation, while Schleswig was not. Holstein was German-speaking, while Schleswig was mostly Danish-speaking. German was however spreading north through Schleswig, and many in both provinces were attracted to the pan-German nationalism that was making itself felt. Schleswig and Holstein rose in armed rebellion against Denmark early in 1848. A Danish army sent to suppress them was defeated by the rebels with help from a German army from Prussia, Mecklenburg, Hanover and Oldenburg, which then went on to invade northern Jutland. The Germans were however defeated and forced to retreat in 1849; in 1850 Prussia withdrew from the war and the Schleswig-Holstein rebels were decisively defeated.

German historians sought to justify a German occupation not just of Schleswig and Holstein, but the whole of the Jutland peninsula – based on the arguments Munch had put forward. Jacob Grimm (one of the brothers whose name is today principally associated with children's fairy tales) published a book in 1848 entitled *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, 'History of the German Language'. He adopted Munch's idea that there had originally been German-speakers in Denmark, specifically in the Jutland peninsula. In Jutland the local dialect of Danish places the definite article before the noun (as in English and German), not as a suffix to it (as in the Danish of the islands). This, for Grimm, was a hangover from the time Jutland spoke German. The eighth century English historian Bede had said that the Jutes came from Jutland, and since southeastern England now spoke a language descended from German, not from Danish, this meant that the Jutes in Jutland had been German speakers. What was particularly chilling for the Danes was the conclusion Grimm drew from his study of linguistic history; Germany, he stated, had a *Volksrecht* or 'national right' to *reoccupy all the areas that had formerly spoken German, whether or not they still did so*. This meant that Jutland (and Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine, Belgium and Holland) should become part of a greater Germany; Denmark should cease to exist, Copenhagen and the islands being given to Sweden (Adriansen 1996, Ødegaard 1994).

Worsaae used archaeology to counter Grimm's claims in a number of polemic articles in popular journals, reprinted as pamphlets. Across southern Schleswig stretched a series of ancient earthen fortifications collectively called the *Danevirke*, and Worsaae argued that this represented the southern edge of what he termed *Danskheden*, or 'Danishness'. '\*The Danish army has again defended Danevirke', he started one pamphlet (Worsaae 1848:1). Legend had it that the original fortification had been built in the tenth century to keep out Germans, volunteers arriving from all over Denmark to help in the construction; Worsaae now envisaged volunteers from all over Scandinavia coming to fight for the Danish cause, and finished with a call to arms:

\*The new Scandinavia will not and cannot allow Slesvig to remain German. Therefore go forward undaunted! The time will surely come when the free, the mighty Scandinavia will remember with pride and joy how *the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish warriors for the first time fought alongside each other, and fought for Danevirke!* (Worsaae 1848:64, original emphasis).



This was not, however, to materialise. Two of Worsaae's other arguments involved the specific use of the concept of prehistory to counter Grimm. The first was to stress the uncertainties of the German claim, because '\*if the Jutland peninsula... once had a particular German population, this was in a definitively prehistoric time' (op. Worsaae 1848:10, original emphasis); and to base a territorial claim on a mere '\*prehistoric possibility' (Worsaae 1848:11, original emphasis) would be '\*absurd, even laughable' (Worsaae 1848:11) except that the Germans took it seriously. The Germans had much better reason to invade France and England, because Franks and Saxons (both of Germanic origin) had occupied both in the historical period, not in some uncertain prehistoric past. And with tongue in cheek he warned Grimm that such claims could work both ways: perhaps the Slavs might reclaim regions of Germany such as Mecklenburg and Pomerania, which they had occupied until the medieval period! In another pamphlet the next year, he reiterated that one cannot build '\*contemporary politics upon the prehistoric situation' (Worsaae 1849a:4). This pamphlet has two further distinctions. It was the first separate work to have the word for 'prehistoric' on its outside cover: *Om en forhistorisk, saakaldet 'tydsk' Befolkning i Danmark. Med Hensyn til Nutidens politiske Bevægelser* ['\*On a prehistoric, so-called 'German' population in Denmark. With regard to present-day political movements'] (fig. 4). Secondly, it contained the first use of the noun *forhistoriker*, 'prehistorian':

\*Instead of refuting Grimm's prehistoric basis for Germany's right of conquest, as would definitely have happened in peaceful times, many otherwise thorough and competent Germans have now praised the prehistorians, and it is only outside Germany that the erudition of these people has been subject to counter-argument and refutation (Worsaae 1849a:7).

This predated the first French use of *préhistorien* documented by Clermont and Smith (1990) by 23 years.

Worsaae's second line of prehistoric argumentation was to use his longer time depth, and specifically the Stone Age, to demonstrate that Grimm's claim simply did not go back far enough:

\*Grimm indeed says with regard to Jutland that this area 'from the beginning and as far as history can reach has been occupied by purely Germanic tribes'. But that great academic, who must know the prehistoric period in Jutland far better than all the Scandinavian archaeologists put together, since he has such definite information about the ancient German population of the peninsula, seems here to have had at the very least a lapse of memory. For it cannot be unknown to him that in Jutland, as in the other lands around the Baltic and North Seas, as well as in the countries on Europe's west coast, there are found numerous traces of a primitive original tribe, which did not know metals but used tools of stone and bone, and which consequently was at the very lowest level of culture. This tribe, which has not just left numerous tools scattered about the fields and in the lakes or bogs, but which also erected a great number of truly remarkable stone dolmens in which the corpses were buried in a unique and simple manner, cannot have belonged to the German people, which these

days benefits so hugely from its *Volksrecht* at the expense of other peoples (Worsaae 1850:11-12).

Worsaae clearly saw that his Stone Age extended so far back in time that it made a nonsense of any claims for ‘originality’ based on peoples or languages whose names were known to history. Worsaae outflanked Grimm’s chronology, just as the Danish army outflanked the invaders and defeated them at the Battle of Fredericia in 1849; but neither victory was to be permanent, as the successful German invasions of Denmark in 1864 and 1940 were to show – not to mention the German attempts to fulfill other aspects of Grimm’s agenda in 1866, 1870, 1914 and 1938-40.

#### PREHISTORIC SCOTLAND: DANIEL WILSON, 1851

Daniel Wilson (fig. 5) is justly famed as the first person to use the English word ‘prehistoric’. It has been pointed out that Gustave d’Eichthal used *préhistorique* in 1845, and that Wilson might have derived the word from him (Clermont and Smith 1990:98-99). There is however no positive indication that Wilson ever read d’Eichthal’s monograph, so most histories of archaeology give him the benefit of the doubt, and regard him as the independent inventor of the word. There is virtually no doubt that he was the first user of the English word. But in view of the fact presented above, that *forhistorisk* and *förhistorisk* appeared in print well over 100 times before Wilson published his book in 1851 (table 1), we must consider the possibility that he derived the concept, and the idea that he needed a word, from Scandinavia.

Against this possibility is the fact that Wilson always claimed to have invented the word himself. In the second edition of his book, he wrote of ‘the term *Prehistoric* – introduced, if I mistake not, for the first time in this work’ (Wilson 1863:xiv, original emphasis). After the publication of Lubbock’s *Pre-historic Times* (Lubbock 1865) he evidently wanted to retain priority, for he wrote to Charles Lyell in that year stating that ‘I coined the word *prehistoric* for my own use, and it made its appearance for the first time, unless I deceive myself, in my *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* in 1851’ (quoted in Kehoe 1998:16, original emphasis). In a letter to J.W. Dawson in 1880 he claimed the term as ‘a bantling of my own’ (quoted in Ash 1999:79, n1) – ‘bantling’ being a Scots word for ‘child’. But did Wilson mean anything more than that he coined the *English* term? His quoted remarks need not imply so.

Wilson could not speak or read the Scandinavian languages, so if he acquired any aspect of ‘prehistoric’ from Scandinavia it must have been by direct communication. The person who first comes to mind is J.J.A. Worsaae. His importance in the Scandinavian context has been examined above; he repeatedly used *forhistorisk*; and he visited Scotland in 1846. But there are grounds for doubting that he was the stimulus. In 1846 Wilson had not yet begun to take an interest in prehistory, but was more concerned with saving medieval buildings in Edinburgh from destruction. Worsaae in any case spent very little time in Edinburgh (Rowley-Conwy in press), and he never met Wilson (Ash 1999:71).

There is however a much more likely suspect: a man who visited Edinburgh in 1849; who became friendly with Wilson and discussed his book with him while it was being written; and who had already used *forhistorisk* himself on several occasions. This

was none other than Peter Andreas Munch (fig. 6), Worsaae's Norwegian opponent in the nationalism debates described above. There is no proof that Munch suggested 'prehistoric' to Wilson, but it is highly likely that he did.

From Munch's published letters it emerges that he was in Edinburgh from about 24 October 1849 to 2 January 1850 (Indrebø and Kolsrud 1924:410-12). Munch evidently wrote to Wilson after leaving to thank him for his hospitality; Wilson replied on 11 January 1850 that:

I am much gratified by the sight of your, already, familiar hand, and not the less so from the very kind references you make to your visits to our fireside, which both the good wife and myself look back to with no little pleasure. I only regret the thought that so long a time must elapse before there can be any reasonable chance of my enjoying the same pleasure again. Meanwhile it will be no little gratification to me to keep up the memory of friendship by an interchange of correspondence; though the gain in point of knowledge will be entirely on my side, when we get beyond the interchange of friendly courtesies (Indrebø and Kolsrud 1924:401).

On 17 January he wrote that

I am sure both Mrs. Wilson and myself will long look back to the pleasant evenings we have enjoyed with you, when you were content to share our homely ways and Society. I cannot promise quite so much for the juveniles; but I can assure you they have not forgot you yet, and are by no means satisfied with my replies to their repeated inquiries: "Why does Professor Munch never come to see us now?" (Indrebø and Kolsrud 1924:405)

In 1851 the Wilsons found a suitable governess for Munch's children, a Miss Buchan, the daughter of a naval surgeon, and Wilson sent a long letter about her to Munch, ending 'Jessie and Jane both send kindest love to little Julia' (Indrebø et al. 1955:2-5).

It is clear from this that Munch became a close family friend of the Wilsons and spent much time in their house. Wilson and Munch had a good deal in common with regard to their uses of archaeology; both men came from subordinate national capital cities, and both were using archaeology in support of the nationalist stirrings in their own countries. Both were rather resentful of the pre-eminent position of Copenhagen archaeology. In Scotland it had long been customary to describe antiquities of unknown origin as 'Danish' (Graham-Campbell 2004). Wilson criticised this in his book (1851:xv), adding that any Vikings in Scotland were likely to have been Norwegian, not Danish (Wilson 1851:522). Worsaae published a book in the same year, on the remains of the Vikings in Britain and Ireland (Worsaae 1851). Worsaae wrote about it to Wilson, who sent this rather snide comment to Munch in a letter of 12 October 1852:

I had a letter from Worsaae lately, at which I could not help smiling. He volunteers an apology for publishing a book going over the same ground as I had done, in part, in my "Prehistoric Annals", without making any mention of it, but states as the reason, that his book was written long before. Now I never dreamt of any such apology being requisite; but when it was offered it struck

me as a very lame one; for his book was not published here till nine months after mine; and I have the best of reasons for knowing that more than one copy reached Copenhagen long before. But we must have you back to Scotland; and back you up with Earls and Dukes, that we may show how different a contribution you will give to our History, Antiquities, and Ethnology, from what Worsaae has done, with all their aid (Indrebø et al. 1955:92).

During their fireside chats Munch and Wilson definitely discussed things that were relevant to Wilson's book. In his letter of 11 January 1850, Wilson asked Munch to reiterate 'the argument from whence you infer the non-Scandinavian origin of the Stennis Stones' (Indrebø and Kolsrud 1924:403). In *Prehistoric Annals* he quoted Munch's reply that the name derived from the Scandinavian *Steinsnes*, or 'promontory of the stones,' the fact that Scandinavian settlers gave the place such a name implied that they found the stones already standing when they arrived (Wilson 1851:112, n1). Wilson also asked for the colloquial Scandinavian names for flint artefacts (Indrebø and Kolsrud 1924:403); in his book he gave the Norwegian word *tordenkiler*, or 'thunderstones' (Wilson 1851:124), which he had evidently received from Munch but this time without naming him as the source. Wilson had even considered dedicating his book to Munch, but as he wrote to Munch on 30 January 1851:

I do not know if I told you I had thought of dedicating the Book to you; but I have made so many attacks in it, not only on our own native theories of a Danish origin for our Antiquities, but also on some directly traceable to Copenhagen, that I thought it would be a questionable compliment, and so I have dedicated it to the Marquess of Breadalbane, our president [*of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*] (Indrebø et al. 1955:5).

Presumably the Marquess could take the flak.

The two men evidently discussed Wilson's book repeatedly and at length. Most of Wilson's book was about the prehistoric period, and it is inconceivable that they did not consider the concept of prehistory, and the need for a term for it. That the Scandinavians had their own term, by then in general use, must have been part of the discussion. Doubtless Wilson formulated the English term himself, but most probably at the prompting of Munch. This appears to resolve the much-discussed question of its origins in the English language.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that Danish, Swedish and Norwegian archaeologists had a developed concept of prehistory, and their own term for it, much earlier than is generally known to historians of archaeology. From its first publication by Christian Molbech in 1834 its use spread, so that well over 100 instances of the words *forhistorisk* and *förhistorisk* up to 1850 can be listed (table 1). Many more have doubtless been overlooked.

In view of the longstanding discussion of the word 'prehistoric,' it is remarkable that this copious usage in the Scandinavian languages has been largely overlooked. The

Anglo-French literature has been scoured for individuals using the term or displaying the concept, but this has not happened for the Scandinavian literature. Partly this is because Scandinavian archaeologists have not (with the exception of Welinder 1991) made much of it in publications in English or French, but mainly it is the language barrier that is to blame. There has been some mention of the issue in at any rate the Swedish literature (Christensson 2005: 76, Hegardt 1997: 117-9), but as noted above, apparently the only non-Scandinavian authority to mention an early Scandinavian usage is Chippindale (1988:310). Normally assiduous in checking the original sources (Chippindale 1988:303), Chippindale was not able to do so in this case, copying his example verbatim from a dictionary (*Gyldendals Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* vol. 5, 1923, columns 536-7) without translating or presumably understanding it, and was also unable to search for further instances. The language barrier thus led to him considering this to be a single precocious instance, not as part of the widespread mainstream usage it really was.

The word and the concept did not always go together – we have seen that Molbech’s use of the term did not entirely correspond to what we now mean by it; and paradoxically C.J. Thomsen, arguably the first man with the concept clearly in mind, did not use the term. But in the end it is no surprise that the nations that invented modern archaeology should also have invented the concept of, and terminology for, the prehistoric period. From there it percolated into English through Peter Andreas Munch’s connection with Daniel Wilson; and the rest, as they say, is history.

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1. All quotations prefixed by an asterisk are translations from the original Danish or Swedish by the present author.
2. All uses of the word ‘prehistoric’ in translated quotes indicate that *forhistorisk* or *förhistorisk* was used in the original; no other word is so translated. We accept ‘prehistoric’ so easily as part of our everyday vocabulary that it is easy to overlook it in print; it is therefore underlined in the translated quotes in order to make clear its presence.
3. *Ledetraad* contained two chapters, of which Thomsen’s was the second. The book was therefore not ‘by’ Thomsen as is sometimes stated. The title page carries no editor’s name, but Briggs (forthcoming, n86) points out that it was commissioned and edited by C.C. Rafn, secretary of the KNOS. I therefore follow Briggs in crediting Rafn as editor in the bibliography.

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Molbech	1834	421, 427, 432, 437, 452, 453, 460
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Worsaae	1849b	3, 4, 5, 6 [twice], 7 [four times], 14 [three times] 16, 17, 21, 22 [twice], 30
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Table 1. Some usages of the Scandinavian words for ‘prehistoric’ up to 1850. The Danish word is *forhistorisk*, and this was also used by the Norwegians Holmboe and Munch; Nilsson and Bruzelius as Swedes used *förhistorisk*. Worsaae’s uses of *forhistoriker*, ‘prehistorian’, are also listed. This table does not pretend to be exhaustive.

Fig. 1. Christian Molbech aged 37, from a drawing by C.A. Jensen (by kind permission of the Museum of National History in Frederiksborg Castle, Hillerød).

Fig. 2. J.J.A. Worsaae, from a retouched photograph accompanying his obituary (Müller 1886).

Fig. 3. Map of Denmark and northern Germany, showing Schleswig, Holstein, the Danevirke fortifications, and the German states involved in the war of 1848-51.

Fig. 4. The title page to Worsaae's pamphlet, apparently the first publication ever to use the word for 'prehistoric' in its title (Worsaae 1849a).

Fig. 5. Daniel Wilson in 1853 (by kind permission of the National Museums of Scotland).

Fig. 6. Peter Andreas Munch (by kind permission of the Royal Library, Copenhagen).





J. A. Worsaae





**Om**  
**en forhistorisk, saakaldet „tydsk”**  
**Befolkning i Danmark.**

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**Med Hensyn til Nutidens politiske Bevægelser**

af

**J. J. A. Worsaae.**

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Aftrykt af „Fædrelandet“ 29 Mai — 2 Juni 1849.

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**Kjöbenhavn.**

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Trykt hos Louis Klein.



Tunny

1853

*Dr. C. Wilson*  
3 Secretary.

